

# Psychology in its place: Personal reflections on the state we're in

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## Abstract

*John Radford's original article (Radford, 2008a) asked some hard questions about the content and purpose of a degree in psychology. The original article prompted a number of replies and a rejoinder from Radford (2008b). In the spirit of carrying on the discussion started by Radford and others, this article offers two personal perspectives on our current state. The first is from a careworn academic who suggests, basically, that psychology at degree level needs to sort out its priorities: the agenda for achieving this should include the identity of psychology within universities, its relationship with A-level psychology, and attention to teaching. The second perspective is from a new psychology graduate who reflects on how his experiences match the situation Radford describes and the consequent lack of intellectual depth in the psychology curriculum. It is suggested that the way out of the state we are in lies in the hands of universities, decidedly not the British Psychological Society.*

*Those who cannot remember their past are condemned to repeat it – George Santayana*

**J**OHN RADFORD's (2008a) article *Psychology in its Place* prompted much discussion and, in the final sentence of his commentary on the numerous replies to his original article, Radford (2008b) expresses the hope that the debate he started will continue. A generation apart, we can add to the deliberations with two different voices. One as a seasoned academic with a career's experience in Higher Education in teaching and examining psychology, having served time as head of a large psychology department. (Also a Chartered Forensic Psychologist, with experience of working as a professional psychologist.) The other as a new under- and postgraduate who read psychology at a university at the highest levels of excellence as measured by the Research Assessment Exercise.

## **THE VOICE OF THE OLD: On A-level psychology**

A million years ago, as a new graduate, I was John Radford's Research Assistant at the time when A-level psychology was in its infancy. Now, as Banyard (2008) notes, A-

level psychology is an established subject with large numbers of candidates. So why is A-level psychology not required for admission to a degree in psychology? I've encountered two arguments in favour of the status quo. The first, benign, view is that psychology is a broad church and we should continue to welcome all comers. The second view, altogether narrower and less benign, I recently encountered at a meeting attended by several senior academics (interestingly all from old universities). While waiting for proceedings to start, people were talking about university entry for psychology and the requisite A-levels. There was general agreement that A-levels in mathematics and biology were absolutely essential, but that A-level psychology was not to be welcomed. The argument against A-level psychology went along the lines that it was not relevant at degree level and, indeed, covered topics like forensic psychology (grimaces all round) that simply gave students the wrong idea about psychology. This line of argument, notwithstanding my personal sensibilities as a forensic psychologist, seems to me to embody two suppositions. First, that psychology is bound to science and to biological science in particular; second, that applied psychology is,

well, beyond the pale. I fear that Kagan's (2008) excellent suggestions for extending the applied boundaries of the teaching and content of psychology at degree level would fall on deaf ears.

### **Becoming mathematically biological**

It is self-evident that psychology and biology share some common subject matter. However, in the race to be scientific is psychology in danger of turning itself into a sub-discipline of biology? The late Liam Hudson in his book *Human Beings* (1975) took the view that the demise of behaviourism and its quasi-scientific trappings heralded the possibility of a psychology concerned with 'Our work; our social, political and cultural loyalties; the lives we live in the privacy of our own homes; and the lives we lead in the privacy of our own heads' (p. 7). I wonder what Hudson would have made of the state we are in today as psychology becomes increasingly obsessed with laboratory experiments and intricate statistics, machines that scan brains and track eye movements, and a quest to become ever more biological?

Now, it may well be the case that some aspects of psychology involve a greater reliance than others on understanding the role of biology. It is probably also true that there are areas, such as neuroscience, which demand a blend of psychology and biology. However, if we are really pursuing a cross-disciplinary approach, then there are certainly areas, such as social psychology, where psychology may benefit from an alliance with other disciplines such as anthropology, politics, and sociology. However, I've seen too many biologists smile with amusement as psychologists strive to become biological and I've heard too many academic psychologists disparage the social sciences to believe that psychology is genuinely moving towards a multi-disciplinary future. As we stumble towards becoming a numerate sub-discipline of biology there needs to be some hard thinking about psychology: what are we and what do we do?

In essence, psychology currently lacks a

grand model, a paradigm, within which to conduct its business. It is the nature of psychologists that we throw off the old – psychoanalysis, gestalt, behaviourism – and condemn it and all its trappings to an academic gulag, never to be taken seriously again. Of course, there are extant paradigms that psychology could espouse: for example, there is an increasing interest in the possibilities raised by evolutionary psychology although, again, this topic receives a mixed reception in some academic quarters.

### **Why study psychology?**

As MacAndrew (2008) notes, only one-fifth of psychology graduates will go on to begin careers as professional psychologists. So if it's not for the career, why do students come to study psychology in such large numbers? As Radford (2008a) points out, we do not know the answer to this question, but one can hazard a guess. It's feasible that many students come to degree level, with or without A-level psychology, thinking that psychology is going to be interesting. Further, some students may expect that what they learn will be applicable in the future, helping them to change the world, or at least make a difference, in some capacity. If this guess is even half right then students' experience of their degree may well not live up to their expectations.

I recently helped organise a careers day for third year undergraduate students. The room was overflowing for the talks on clinical psychology, forensic psychology, health psychology, and occupational psychology: then, as one, the students left as we came to PhDs and research and academic careers. I spoke with several students afterwards: the gist of their comments was 'Why would we want to do more of this?' and, disparagingly, 'Who wants to be an academic?'

Now, if it is the case that psychology at degree level is perceived by students as dull, disconnected from A-level psychology, and distant from the (seemingly still attractive) professions of psychology, could the word spread that psychology degrees are boring?

Could the bubble of endless applications for psychology degrees be set to burst, or at least deflate, as psychology's reputation as an interesting subject goes into decline? In this respect some honest comments from students to allow their voice to be heard would be welcome.

### **Academics: Researchers or teachers?**

In a world obsessed by measuring performance and compiling league tables, in many universities it is research and the money and kudos it brings that is king. However, the drive for large research groups clustered around particular themes can produce an imbalance of specialities within a department. Such an imbalance has obvious effects on specialist teaching. However, any concerns about an imbalance are easily dismissed as, to justify the chase to appoint the best researcher, we all know that 'Anyone can teach anything'. This phrase, one that I've heard too many times, marginalises specialist teaching – indeed, some might say teaching, period. Although most widely felt at undergraduate level, the emphasis on research-led appointments may also impact on postgraduate professional courses. If anyone really can teach anything, then why have specialists teaching on professional courses? Appoint the best researcher to fit the department's research profile and assign them teaching duties on clinical, forensic, or whatever other professional courses there may be. Further, if Moore and Semmens-Wheeler (2008) are correct in saying that 'Teaching at undergraduate level is evermore being given to postgraduate students' (p. 35) then the standing of teaching is in trouble. (As a parent, I want my money back! I thought I was paying course fees for academics to teach my children, not to do their research.) The causes of concerns about teaching standards in universities are undoubtedly complex but the condition is plain: the educational function of higher education is in a right old state.

Any lingering doubts about the current state of play should be dispelled by the cur-

rent inquiry by the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee into slipping academic standards (details available at [http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary\\_committees/ius/ius\\_301008.cfm](http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/ius/ius_301008.cfm)). That the inquiry is concerned with several topics, such as the balance between teaching and research and student support and engagement, reinforces the concerns that teaching is taking a back seat while research drives the agenda.

### **THE VOICE OF THE NEW**

John Radford (2008a) presents evidence that the history of psychology is rarely taught (explicitly) within British universities. After A-levels, including A-level psychology, I began an undergraduate psychology degree, graduating in 2007, and my experience supports Radford's view. In three years as an undergraduate, followed by a year as a post-graduate studying for a Masters in research methods, I sat through precisely one lecture on Freud. Skinner was covered exclusively within the context of a 10-lecture module on learning (along with Pavlov, Watson, and so on) that was taught and finished within the first semester of the first year. The focus of these courses was the great figures' research rather than the context or paradigm within which they worked. Beck, Bandura and others were less lucky still, being completely neglected, except perhaps for a single mention of a doll named Bobo.

The paucity of depth to this learning experience is fully demonstrated when it is considered that the modules representing the currently favoured paradigms (the often interchangeable 'cognitive psychology' and 'biological bases') were taught in five out of the six teaching semesters during the undergraduate triennium. An option to take these modules in the sixth semester was also available for my course. For broad comparison, 'social psychology', 'developmental psychology' and 'abnormal psychology' were each taught only in one semester.

### Old bad, contemporary good

My experience as a student does, however, take me further than a simple neglect of psychology's history. On the odd occasions that 'historical' figures were mentioned in undergraduate lectures they were positively rubbished. Skinner was brought up in the context of linguistics, only so that he could be laughed at in the light of Chomsky. Further, Skinner was frequently, and ironically, mocked for his reductionism. Freud suffered worse still: in one lecture, the lecturer asked, 'So what would Freud think caused this?' Predictable silence. 'Come on, just make it up. That's all Freud did.' Predictable merriment.

That paradigm-founders such as Freud, Skinner, Copernicus or Einstein present an incomplete picture, or are open to *ad hominem* attacks does not seem to be as important within the natural sciences as in psychology. We can clearly see in 2009 the respect that Charles Darwin and his evolutionary paradigm continues to be afforded by biologists, despite the fact we know that Darwin only possessed (and only could possess) a partial answer to the puzzle of evolution. Similarly, we do not see physicists distancing themselves from Newton now that we know his laws of motion and universal gravitation break down near the speed of light. To take further examples, this time from an equivalent age, can we say that Einstein's response to quantum physics was less of a mistake than Skinner's approach to language? Or that 50 years after publication, Einstein's views on plate tectonics (illustrated by Hapgood, 1958) seem any less credible than anything written by Freud?

Across academic subjects, we psychologists are perhaps unique in distancing ourselves so completely from our past. My opinion is that this rejection of our history is at least partly attributable to the ever-increasing move away from subjects such as sociology, anthropology, and philosophy, and a move towards biology. These shifts within psychology are discussed by Radford (2008a) and several of those who

responded (e.g. Crozier and Cooper, 2008).

There are sociologists who have discussed the imperialist tendencies and condescension with which the hard sciences approach the social sciences. This imperialism is repeatedly commented upon by authors contributing to *Evolution, Gender and Rape* (Travis, 2003), a book devoted to the misunderstandings of Thornhill and Palmer (2000) and their infamous work *A Natural History of Rape*. Lloyd (2003) comments on the imperial nature of evolutionary theorists:

*Thornhill and Palmer actually claim that evolved cognition itself may interfere with evolutionary investigation into cultural phenomena: 'Evolved psychological intuitions about behavioural causation can mislead individuals into believing that they know as much as experts do about proximate human motivation...' The experts on social behaviour here seem to be the evolutionists, rather than the social scientists (p. 259; emphasis is Lloyd's)*

Given these tensions between the social sciences on the one hand and the natural sciences on the other, it does not strike me as surprising that as attempts to naturalise psychology continue, some psychologists seek to distance themselves from the previous incarnations of psychology more closely allied with the social sciences and pour scorn on their methods. It could be argued that previous paradigms have not stood the test of time but this does not negate their historical importance in helping us remember our past. I have no doubt that this approach does a significant disservice to psychology and, most relevantly in the current context, to both students and the wider image of psychology.

The first reason for seeing the current state as providing a disservice to students is that a disregard or rejection of explanations of human behaviour that utilise accounts beyond functional biology will not help students understand the richness of psychology or, indeed, the role of psychology in the world more generally. The theories of psychology that have fallen from favour can continue to teach us a great deal, and in many

cases they continue to hold cultural weight and clinical utility. If students are led to believe that these older theories have been completely 'disproven', then their ability to 'think critically' about the issues they encounter and place them in temporal context will be severely hindered. Further, the methodologies of many of these paradigms arguably offer more 'real world' utility. For example, discourse analysis, which is possibly the most significant alternative to the naturalistic methodology of the mainstream (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), was not mentioned in any of my compulsory lectures. Yet, in terms of transferable skills, discourse analysis demands of the student the ability to conduct interviews, run focus groups, and make sense of complex verbal exchanges (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). It is plausible that the skills necessary to perform discourse analysis are more highly valued by employers than the ability to conduct, say, a 3-way analysis of variance. Given that only a small percentage of psychology graduates will enter a profession directly related to psychology (Radford, 2008a), there is an argument that the skills inherent in the methodologies of discourse analysis should encourage the study of phenomenological and discursive strands of psychological research at an undergraduate level.

A second disservice to students lies in the absence of teaching of history and theory, with the consequence of an impoverished understanding of both previous and current thinking in psychology: it is an inescapable fact that a lack of knowledge of the past diminishes comprehension of the present. Cognitive neuroscience is currently an influential area for research, however it cannot and – given the technological restrictions that surely will not be overcome for a significant amount of time – will not take into account the pan-cultural, pan-historical and pan-societal factors that are essential for anything like a full understanding of the complexity of the human condition (Malik, 2001). If undergraduate psychology courses do not cover in detail the alternative perspectives to the currently fashionable para-

digm then that is a decidedly worrying development.

Crozier and Cooper's (2008) response to Radford is quite right: academics from other fields such as Foucault are difficult to understand for student and teacher alike. The same is surely true of Freud. However, these writers and the perspectives they embody have critical points to make about psychology (see for instance Foucault, 1969). However, even for those students who may ultimately reject these approaches, a more enlightened and reflective approach to their chosen perspective within psychology would surely result.

### **A-level psychology**

Ironically, 'historical' paradigms are covered in far greater detail at A-level than at degree level. As well as covering the 'core' areas in approximately equal measures, my A-level psychology course included the 'Great Debates of psychology'. These debates included 'nature versus nurture', 'idiographic versus nomothetic knowledge', and 'free will versus determinism'. Further, the examination required that these debates were all framed by the respective outlooks of behaviourism, biology, humanism, and psychoanalysis. While we may wince at such crude divisions, this approach does require an understanding of all four approaches and the significant works within each field. In addition, as A-levels are studied in the context of (usually) two or three other subjects, the student is exposed to an even broader knowledge base at an equivalent academic level.

For the purposes of university admission, rather than rejecting A-level psychology in favour of biology and mathematics, we should consider why A-level psychology potentially provides a better breadth of understanding of psychology than the narrow focus of the degree course. If the way I have described my A-level psychology is seen by some to be archaic, then this should only heighten concerns about psychology in Higher Education.



## Conclusion

So, where does all this angst leave us? Is the current state of affairs really as good as it gets? The easy response is to look to the Society to sort it all out. However, as Reddy and Rochelle (2008) note, the role of the Society in regulating undergraduate and professional courses is not straightforward. In any case, the Society is not a neutral body: members of Society committees will have their own agendas and views, liberal or otherwise. The more likely agents for change are the universities themselves. Would it be so difficult for a university to break ranks and state that it favoured applicants with A-level psychology? (This feels a faintly ridiculous question to ask: would entry to a degree in Mathematics require A-level Maths, would a degree in English require A-level English?)

How do we get teaching back on the agenda? Well, as any behaviourist knows, there are two ways to change behaviour. The first is to reward academics who teach to a high standard. Ways to administer such a

reward should not be beyond the wit of those responsible for running universities (who would do well first to get rid of those dreadful league tables). The second is to punish those who teach badly (or, in some instances, not at all). I [CH] wonder if the appalling comments about Freud et al. on GH's course were made by young lecturers whose own educational experience had left them bereft of a sense of the history of their subject. Ways and means to administer organisational punishment are well practiced in other parts of the educational sector. Ofstead-type inspections for universities are in the wind: perhaps a few university psychology Departments 'failing' in their teaching would focus attention onto students and the content of their courses.

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